U.S. Department of Agriculture
Office of the Secretary

Improving the Competitive Position of Agriculture in the Ten Northeastern States

Thank you for the opportunity to take part in your Northeast Agricultural Leadership Assembly. I would like to have been here for the full 3 days--and I'm sure it's been an excellent conference. Of course, Maynard Dolloff, Norm Berg and others provided good USDA representation.

Let me assure you, right now, that the Department of Agriculture considers northeast agriculture a vital part of America's total food and fiber industry. I am here today to reaffirm the Department's determination to speak for those who depend on the land for their livelihood; and to assure you that this administration has no intention of cutting back on basic USDA programs for food and fiber producers.

We have not forgotten our main mission. Ninety percent of our program is still aimed at rural America. We are aware that your states produced almost $2 billion of agricultural products in 1978, according to preliminary figures, and that you are interested in increasing your competitive position in agriculture. That is an important goal for your region.

I want to stress USDA's responsiveness to the people. Our traditional delivery system--involving Extension, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, the Soil Conservation Service, Farmers Home Administration, the Forest Service, and the state agricultural experiment stations at the land-grant universities--has been helping with local people for a long, long time.

Remarks prepared for delivery by Dr. M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary for Conservation, Research and Education, before the Northeast Agricultural Leadership Assembly, Cherry Hill, New Jersey, March 22, 1979

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Almost every county in this cuntry has a USDA office where one can come and feed his or her ideas into the pipeline. The new Joint Council on Food and Agricultural Sciences and the National Agricultural Research and Extension Users' Advisory Board, which represents "end users" of the Department's research, and education programs, are national channels for suggestions.

We are doing many things in USDA to help you in your efforts:

The Joint Council and Users Advisory Board which I mentioned are part of a new Department agency, the Science and Education Administration. SEA consolidates activities in federal agricultural research in cooperative research and extension work with the states, and library and teaching services. Included in this new agency are a new Human Nutrition Center, an integrated pest management program, a competitive grants program, and higher education activities transferred from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

SEA's Agricultural Research arm continues the work of the Agricultural Research Service, concentrating on basic, applied, and developmental research. in crop and animal protection and production, soil and water management, pest management, post-harvest technology, and human nutrition.

The Extension unit helps farmers, processors, handlers, farm families, and communities in applying the results of food, agricultural and natural resources research. County agents are backed up by subject-matter specialist in practically every field.

The Cooperative Research segment administers federal research funds to state agricultural experiment stations at land-grant colleges and universities of 1862 and 1890, schools of forestry and other research institutions and organizations.

A Technical Information System headquartered at Beltsville, Maryland develops technical data and library systems and services. It includes a Food and Nutrition Information and Education Materials Center.

The Higher Education unit leads USDA education activities, interacting with associate deans for resident instruction at colleges of agriculture and providing funds to help teaching programs.

The Human Nutrition Center is USDA's primary unit for basic research on nutritional needs and the nutrient composition of foods. The Center administers funds and coordinates efforts in research, extension, and teaching, both nationally and internationally. Food consumption surveys provide dietary guidance and information needed by physicians, consumers, and federal, state, and local agencies administering food and nutrition programs. Its facilities soon will include a new laboratory in Boston.

The Integrated Pest Management Program is another of our top priorities.

Farmers for years have practiced multiple pest control strategies. But some 10,000 different species of insects, nematodes, thousands of kinds of weeds and plants, and many diseases continue to consume, damage, or destroy valuable agricultural and forest products.

Some authorities estimate that pests damage or destroy as much as half the world's production of plants and plant products usable for food and fiber.

Although many researchers have long sought solutions to the problem, it wasn't until 1971 that the search for more effective, environmentally compatible pest controls took on its rightful significance. An Integrated Pest Management program based on prevention, monitoring, and less chemical pesticide use, was developed at that time.

This expanded research and extension program will help producers, homeowners, and the public reduce losses caused by pests, reduce costs of control, improve environmental quality, and increase production profits through more efficient pest management systems.

Rural Development

USDA has had a long-standing commitment to rural development. Rural conservation, research, and extension are primary elements of that commitment. We are committed to helping rural Americans improve employment, investment, and income opportunities. We are committed to helping rural Americans gain access to better community services and facilities. We are committed to conserving resources and abating pollution in rural communities and to improving the quality of life in rural America. And we are committed to the continuation of research and extension efforts that hold the key to this better life.

Land Use

We need your help in the area of land use--a field you in the northeast are leaders in. USDA specialists are meeting with people across the country to help them shape land use policy. Most land use decisions must be made by individuals at the local level. It is up to communities to decide for themselves what their resources are and what they want to do with them. This means they need two very important types of information:

1. Facts about the natural resource base, such as soil surveys, inventories of soil and water conservation needs, and geologic data;

2. A means to determine what the people in a community really want for their future.

Our Soil Conservation Service will publish 350 county-wide farmland maps and 12 state-wide maps by the end of fiscal 1979. Plans are to complete 1200 high priority county maps by 1981. These "important farmland" maps will be extremely useful to landowners and local decisionmakers--in the northeast well as other regions-- for determining the wise use of land.

In your 10 states, over 12 million acres have been identified as prime farmland, but only about 6 million acres of this prime land are being used for crop production. You, therefore, have a resource base of up to an additional

6 million acres of prime farmland on which to build a more competitive position for the northeast.

Increased public participation and increased public awareness are among the keys to wise decisions. We need the views and goals of the people to determine what is best for the community. For example, more than a third of a million people offered comments and suggestions during our recent Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE II) study to help us determine whether National Forest areas should be recommended as wilderness or made available for other uses. RARE II areas located in Pennsylvania, Vermont and New Hampshire are the subject of lively debates as to their best future use.

Many questions must be answered.

How much prime agricultural land do we need?

Should the best land be reserved for agriculture, or should the demand for housing take precedence?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of retaining agricultural land close to populous areas?

How can the farmer cope with high land costs, high labor costs, and high property taxes that go along with creeping urbanization?

How can the transition to urban uses be made, while maintaining food and fiber production?

Certainly we should not endanger our long-term productivity, even in a time of record harvests and strong reserves.

We should not shift prime farmlands out of agriculture and try to make up the production by over-fertilizing marginal lands or by draining and plowing up our wetlands and other fragile environmental areas.

We must not force ourselves to cultivate land that takes more gas and oil to produce crops, that uses more water, or that costs more to protect or

clean up the environment. There is just as urgent a need for energy efficiency on the farm as there is in town.

We must not urbanize acres that withstand soil erosion well and plow up other acres that wash or blow away easily. Despite four decades of effort, sediment pollution from soil erosion is still depleting the nation's land base and still affects water supplies throughout America.

We are committed to reviewing USDA efforts to get on top of these problems. The President's 1980 budget requested $75 million to launch a targeted effort against serious water polluting and sediment-producing areas in this country.

Finally, we must not endanger the agricultural economy that is the base of most rural communities.

The Department wants to help the states maintain a land base at a solid level of concentration. We are guiding USDA programs in conservation, research, and education in a way that has the maximum favorable effect on local decisions about prime farmlands. And state directors of our FmHA also are implementing our land use policy. To be successful in this effort we need closer ties with the state governors and state departments of agriculture to give them a voice in spending the federal dollar in their states. We don't want to dictate from Washington. Rather, we want the governor's office or the state legislature, as well as landowners and land users, to have a role in decisions. And we may have an Agricultural Land Preservation Study Commission at work on this issue soon.

Natural Resources

The Department of Agriculture also has major responsibilities for planning for and conserving the nation's natural resources. But this responsibility in itself does not give us the ability to ask all the right questions or develop all the solutions to difficult problems.

The Forest Service was given long-range planning authority in the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA). USDA's update of the national assessment and the national forest and rangelands conservation program is underway for presentation in 1980. Beyond this assessment, there remain dozens of issues.

A second authority for protecting our natural resources is the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977. This Act--or RCA--provides the broadbased authority to appraise the soil, water, and related resources of this country to improve national soil and water conservation programs.

In 1978 we had help in developing this soil and water conservation program from more than 170,000 people from nearly every county in the country. Our efforts are closely linked with Resources Planning Act authority, and that program also is scheduled for submission to Congress in 1980.

One way to reduce the flow of wasted nutrients into our surface water and recycle them is through land disposal of both sewage effluent and sludge, and we're working with the Environmental Protection Agency and the Food and Drug Administration to make this approach practical.

A third authority was provided in Title 14 of the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977. This focuses on research and extension. While phenomenal advances have been made, trend lines on agricultural productivity indicate a much slower growth in the next 10 to 20 years. If true, should we be looking at new directions for research? If the answer is yes, where should we look? Competitive grants are going to several northeastern institutions as well as land grant schools to seek needed research breakthroughs.

The fourth authority, the Renewable Resources Extension Act (RREA) of 1978, is an effort to strengthen the natural resources role of Cooperative Extension on the basis of the Renewable Resources Planning Act assessment and the Resources Conservation Act appraisal.

In addition to these four specific authorities, USDA has a long standing responsibility to provide federal leadership in food, fiber, and forest production. Our role includes planning, research, extension, financial, and technical assistance, and liaison with the states.

I'm sure you will agree that there are many problems to be solved and many assumptions to be verified.

We know energy costs are going to increase, but do we have any concept of what they will be in the year 2050, or how they will affect our food-producing systems?

Do we know the long-term implications of pollution on our lakes and rivers?

Will there be significant shifts of climate that will affect our food-producing capability?

Will increasing energy and transportation costs reaffirm the importance of growing more crops near our population centers?

These are only a few of the questions we must answer. Major breakthroughs are needed throughout our social and physical sciences, such as those made in biological pest control and conservation tillage. You can help inspire research that will lead to concrete actions for defending and wisely using our critically needed resources.

The Department also is working to strengthen our present natural resources programs. Merrill L. "Pete" Petosky is now on the job as assistant deputy director for Extension's natural resources program. His appointment signifies new initiatives and emphases on Extension programs in forestry, land and water use, wildlife, environmental quality, pollution abatement, and energy.

Bille Hougart has been appointed aquaculture coordinator for USDA. His primary job is to direct and oversee the development of an aquaculture plan for the Department and to coordinate efforts with other federal agencies, the Congress, and the aquaculture or fish-farming industry.

Help for the Small Farmer

The Department is now directing more and more attention to the problems of the small and part-time farmer and toward encouraging the use of "appropriate tehnology. Here are some key developments:

--Last summer USDA cosponsored five regional small farm conferences with the Community Services Administration and ACTION. More than 400 people identified and rated high priority concerns, which the Department is now studying.

--In a memorandum issued earlier this year, Secretary Bergland said: "It is the policy of this Department to encourage, preserve, and strengthen the small farm as a continuing component of American agriculture." The memo established a policy committee on small farm assistance and a USDA working group to conduct small farm activities for the Department.

--State Rural Development Committees are establishing State Small Farm Committees to develop a plan of action for each state.

--"Guidelines for Small Farm Enterprises" were developed at an Extension short course by state specialists and have been distributed to all states.

--The Farmers Home Administration has allocated over $400 million in annual operating and farm ownership loan funds to assist small-scale and new-entry farmers. FmHA is loaning money under the Agricultural Credit Act of 1978--at low interest--to farmers who qualify.

--The Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service has earmarked $1.3 million in 1979 for special rural development conservation projects to help small farmers solve conservation and water problems.

--A New England-wide small farms program for six states has just been developed as follow-up to the Northeast Regional Small Farm Conference. The Community Services Administration, ACTION, USDA's Extension Service in Massachusetts, and the Farmers Home Administration will each contribute $104,000 to the 1979 budget. Under this project, several federal agencies will work together toward a common goal.

--Through a joint effort, the Maine Forest Service and the Maine Rural Development Committee--with USDA furnishing financial and technical assistance --are developing the Forest Products Marketing and Management Association in central Maine. This will be a self-supporting forestry cooperative to help the small woodlot owner. Private forest owners harvest 38 percent of our softwood and 76 percent of hardwood. These four million landowners hold the key to much of the potential growth of our forestry resources.

--Another major project in the Northeast is the Forest Management, Marketing and Small Industry Development Pilot Program by the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension Service a Title V Rural Development Project. Goals of this new project include: Determining the feasibility of a forestry management-marketing system; deciding if newly established forest industries in northwest Connecticut can be sustained by a landowners organization; and determining how to develop and provide leadership for an organization to manage the forest land in these communities.

Energy

The Department also has an important role in energy research. In dealing with the rural applications of energy, we get into forestry among other things--into wood for energy.

Your region has made an impressive and highly visible effort to alert the public about the use of wood as a heating fuel. Your releases to the mass

media, publications, and field days held by the Extension Service and other interested groups and organizations provided a large segment of the population with vital information on saving energy and cutting heating costs by using wood.

The programs and projects I have mentioned today will take place in an economy beset by inflation. Farmers are among the biggest consumers in our country. They have been hit as hard, if not harder than any other segment of our society. They have suffered greatly because of the inflationary price spiral on farm supplies, machinery, and other services essential to producing food. This is why Secretary Bergland has committed the Department to do everything within its power to support and assist President Carter in his anti-inflation programs.

In closing, I want to repeat that USDA is determined to follow the dictates of President Lincoln in 1862 when he signed the bill which established a Department designed "to serve the interests of the family farmer." We are determined to continue as a grass roots Department which bases its programs on recommendations from the public.

Thank you.

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